



# How to:

## Write for Publication in Medical Education

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### Introduction

Getting published should be seen as an integral part of the teaching /researcher role. Clinicians in both primary and secondary care setting wishing to have an academic role, should see researching their own practice and disseminating the findings in publications as key. Often writing for publication is perceived as problematic and would-be authors identify a number of blocks which impact on their ability to produce a completed article. This paper is intended to allow you to become aware of the most effective approaches you can adopt when writing for publication. For the novice writer, it is important to appreciate that there are different types of publication which have differing degrees of status attached to them (Delamont and Atkinson, 2004).

Book reviews are easy to do and can be accumulated by writing to review editors of journals that you like / want to be published in, saying who you are and what type of book you would like to review. They are usually brief, about 1,000 words in length and require you to give an informed opinion in an accessible way. It is helpful sometimes for would be writers to begin by critiquing the work of others. Chapters in Edited Collections. Editors of academic handbooks invite contributions, if you know that an edited volume is being put together you can offer to contribute to it. Chapters which contain practical advice and exemplars drawn from practice are always welcomed by those whose task it is to compile edited books. If you have a really good idea of your own about a marketable topic for an Edited collection you can approach a publisher with a proposal and edit a collection of articles in book form yourself. These take a lot of work, but are a good experience and allow you to have ownership of the types of things contained in the handbook.

Text books, either single or co-authored explain a topic area simply for students, pulling together earlier research and synthesising ideas. While Monographs of original research are extremely difficult to get accepted for publication, these are the highest status publication for an academic CV.

For most aspiring authors, the most usual way to get your name in print is to write a Journal Article, these are peer reviewed and this is a highly valued process in academic life. Anything that is peer reviewed is high status, although the different Journals themselves have differing degrees of status. So aim to get published in the higher status ones and be prepared to rework your rejected manuscript so that it can be submitted to a different (lower status) journal. Choose the journal carefully and make sure that its aims and scope match your topic.

### Getting started

Would be authors often have a whole list of ready made 'reasons' as to why it is that they have not yet been successful in getting their many ideas and projects written up and submitted to journals for publication. Before looking at how to write it is important to consider some of the 'reasons' that are often used to explain why people don't write. As you read through them, consider which of these statements apply to you:

#### Problem

- I don't have enough time to write*
- I have too many good ideas*
- I find it hard to structure the article*
- I suffer from writer's block*
- I spend too much time rewriting*
- I am not sure when to write the title and the abstract*
- Other people keep correcting what I write*
- I don't know which journal to send my paper to*
- Getting past the reviewers is a major problem*
- I don't know if I have written a good article*

Writing is frequently shrouded in mystique people assume, wrongly, that published authors are naturally 'gifted and successful', and that they somehow have 'the knack' making it easier for them to produce an article that it is for others. It's really important to forget the romantic imagery of the author, writing is not a gift, it's a craft skill, it needs to be worked at; even successful authors need to devote time and energy to their writing. The results come from hard work, drafting and redrafting and this takes commitment and time.

**Getting published**, the criteria on which papers are accepted are generally considered to include the following:

- ▶ Originality: is the work new or does it offer a different perspective?
- ▶ Well designed and executed study.
- ▶ Significance: does it say something novel or interesting?
- ▶ Is it theoretically informed?
- ▶ First disclosure: has it appeared in print elsewhere?

If you feel that you have conducted a piece of work that fits these criteria, then it is really important that your work does not fall at the first publication hurdle and get rejected by an editor because you have failed to do appreciate the conventions of your target journal. Look at the medical education field, which of the journals would you want to be published in? You need to decide whether your writing is aimed at Education for Primary Care, Medical Education, Medical Teacher, Advances in Health Sciences Education or . . .

You will easily be able to understand what the editor wants by becoming familiar with that particular publication, and to do this you need to appreciate the conventions of your target journal, what is their word limit, what is the 'house style', is the referencing Harvard

or Vancouver? Failure to meet these basic expectations may result in rejection and so it is important to do your homework and get to know your chosen journal.

**Planning and drafting**, writing is not just an extension of research or thinking, but a distinct process in itself. This process can be formalised by planning what it is that you want to say and how you want to say it, thinking of what to include, what literature you will need to support your argument and what your paper adds to what is already known on the topic. The time spent on this planning stage is not time wasted. Try to map out the paper, by thinking of the message you want to get across, can you convey it in one sentence? Think of your intended audience and consider the issues that are important to them. If you cannot describe your message clearly your writing will be disorganised and your attempts to produce a paper will probably fail. It is often helpful to address the following questions;

- ▶ Why did I start?
- ▶ What did I do?
- ▶ What did I find?
- ▶ What does it mean?

Now you can begin to draft the paper, keeping in mind the house style and layout for your 'target' journal, remember any piece of writing is made up of a number of units of thought. Each of these should each be expressed in paragraphs and each paragraph should start with a clear message (or 'topic sentence'). Paragraphs are much easier to manage than word counts. When you begin drafting the paper try to be creative in your approach, often we can too easily allow our critical faculties to dominate and the need to produce the 'perfect' paper acts as a block. The answer is to prepare well and then to start writing free text; remember this is the first draft so try to avoid 'correcting' your work as you write. If you need to reference a point, just make a note that a reference is required; try to avoid interrupting your flow by searching out the illusive paper or book that you want to cite.

Remember that in order to write you need to make sure you have the planned outline in front of you. This is your route map and will ensure that you maintain a clear direction in your writing you need to decide on the writing medium that most suits you, for the draft, is it a word processor, a digital recorder or pen and paper? You also need space in which to write, both physical and mental. Everyone experiences writer's block at various times when they are writing. Usually the best solution is not to try to fight it. Don't stare at the screen or doodle on a blank sheet of paper hoping that the inspiration will come!. Do something else, and then go back to the writing. If the block persists it may be an indication that you have not done a good enough job at the planning stage and so are unclear as to what you are writing. You may need to revisit your planning brief. Try to ensure that there is continuity in your writing, the best way to ensure this is to try to write each section in one go and before you break off note what you are planning to discuss next. It is much easier to return to a piece when you can pick up on a specific train of thought, but it is vital to remember that this is the first draft- it does not have to be perfect.

## References

**Delamont, S. and Atkinson, P. (1998)** *Successful Research Careers*. Berkshire: Open University Press. This provides an extensive reading list, below are just a few that may help.

Oxford University has a useful series of books on grammar, punctuation and style; *One Step Ahead*. These are small, cheap publications all of which would be helpful to any author.

Practical help with writing can be found in;

**Becker, H. S. (1993)**. *Writing for Social Scientists*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. This is helpful and funny.

**Becker, H.S. (1990)**, *Tricks of The Trade*. Chicago: Chicago University press. This is a companion to the book on writing, this time about thinking – excellent.

## Rewriting the Article

Having written the first draft the hardest bit is over; you will almost certainly be dissatisfied with it, but the most important thing is that you have now written something. What you should now do is to take a break from it, under no circumstances should you start trying to alter or edit your draft straight away. Leave it at least overnight, preferably longer. When you go back to it you can start asking yourself the big questions:

- ▶ Is there a clear message?
- ▶ Is the message worth publicising is it new and / or important?
- ▶ Is the structure appropriate?
- ▶ Is the style appropriate for the intended audience?

**Remember:** failure to address any one of these points will make publication extremely unlikely. Having redrafted the paper you then need to ensure that your paper is presented in such a way that it meets the requirements of your chosen journal. Re-read the 'Instructions to Authors' and make sure that you have followed them to the letter. Ensure that all your data are correct, check and double check your information to ensure that you can prove or support everything you say. Make sure that any figures you include are internally consistent and that the writing style is clear, straightforward and grammatically correct. But be careful not to get caught up in the detail. Set a clear deadline to ensure that you do not get lost in this rewriting stage forever. Your objective is publication – not perfection! You can then add the extras, ensure that there are sufficient recent and relevant references to support your arguments and that these are provided in the house style. Now is the time to write the finishing touches, think of a title, try to ensure that it is catchy, but unambiguous and write an abstract that captures the essence of your paper. Include a letter to the Editor stating what you feel this paper adds to the debate and why you feel it sits well with this journal,

Once you have written the article and sent it off to the journal you have to consider the possible outcomes and how you will deal with them. There are a number of different options available to a journal editor.

**Outright rejection** - The journal sends you a nice but firm rejection. This happens to everyone at some point – be positive. You have two alternatives, you can throw the manuscript away or you can adapt it and send it to a different, possibly lower status journal for consideration, ensuring that it conforms to the house style of that journal.

**Major revisions, resubmit, repeat review**, this will provide you with a set of detailed feedback from the reviewers, act on the se, make the changes and resubmit the manuscript with a letter to the editor, thanking the reviewers for their insightful attention to your paper and providing a very detailed account of how and where each change has been made, or your rationale for not having made a particular change.

**Minor revisions**, this is a great outcome, make the changes quickly and efficiently, return the amended manuscript together with a letter highlighting the amendments and thanking the reviewers for the comments.

**Outright acceptance** is almost unheard of, but a fantastic result. Getting publishing, it is exciting and addictive - the more you do the better you get.

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